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NOTES FROM THE ARCHIVES

Indian Boarding School History: An analysis of two letters from the Perris Indian School

BY ERICA MAIEN WARD

Abstract: This paper is not meant to be the traditional research paper. It is a brief look into the documents researchers find and analysis while researching on a topic. The documents provide a view into the people and policies of that time period. The two letters that will be analyzed later in this paper are examples of Indian boarding schools' policies that had direct effect on the lives of the students and their families.¹ In the turn of the twentieth century, Indian boarding schools were still operating on the premise of assimilation of the American Indian into the "white culture."² Hopefully, this paper will encourage people to explore a more comprehensive understanding of United States history and its relationship to the American Indian children.

¹ The term "Indian boarding schools" is problematic due to the possibility of confusion with people from India; however, this is the most prominent term used when referring to the school system the United States government established to assimilate the American Indian children. Because of this I will use the term in this paper.

² "American Indian" will be used in the body of the paper to avoid any confusion with the people from India, who are referred to as Indians. The term "white culture" though derogatory is also necessary in reference to label the desired social culture. "White culture" generally refers to Anglo-Saxon culture with a spackling of pieces from France and other "accepted" white cultures.

Indian Boarding Schools

The United States government tied Native Americans' naturalization to the eradication of Native American cultural identity and complete assimilation into the "white culture."¹ The forty-ninth Congress passed an act in 1887 during their second session that established "every Indian born within the territorial limits of the United States who has voluntarily taken up...his residence separate and apart from any tribe of Indians...[and] adopted the habits of civilized life..." may secure a United States citizenship.² Ultimately, Indian boarding schools became one of the solutions the United States government employed to "civilize" the Native Americans and thus eliminate the "Indian problem," which was the continued existence of unique, sovereign American Indian societies within the political borders of the United States.³ The persistence of American Indian societies were perceived as a blight upon U.S. expansion and progress as their continuation thwarted the evolution of individual American Indians in the common parlance of the late 19th century. In this regard, as House Representative John A. Elston stated at a subcommittee hearing in 1920, "...a student...is an elevating influence and a leaven in the tribe for the improvement of the tribe..."⁴ In addition to

¹ In this paper terms referring racially to a group of people will be in the quotes. The quotes come from a time period in which the normal reference to a Native American was "Indian". This does not excuse the derogatory terms or the behaviors of degrading people in the past and unfortunately some in the present continue.

² Charles J. Kappler, ed, *Laws*, Vol. 1, *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties* (New York: AMS Press, 1904), 35.

³ Philip Weeks, *Farewell, My Nation: The American Indian and the United States in the Nineteenth Century*, The American History Series, 2nd ed (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2001): 47-48. The issue of the sovereignty of the American Indians was legally defined and established through the course of several cases in the 1830's. The Supreme Court cases *Cherokee Nation v Georgia* (1831) and *Worcester v Georgia* (1832) determined the American Indians' sovereignty only to be undermined by the enforcement of the Indian Removal Acts (1830) by President Andrew Jackson.

⁴ House of Representatives, *Indians Of the United States: Investigation of the Field Service*, Vol. 3, Hearings By a Subcommittee of the Committee On Indian Affairs (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 1084.

“civilizing” the American Indian children; the American government foresaw the use of the American Indian children to extinguish the “savagism” perpetrated by American Indian tribes.⁵

An influential figure in the development of the Indian boarding school system was Richard H. Pratt, a United States Army general, who fought during the General Pratt recognized the opportunity to exploit the connection between the Native Americans and their influence on their tribes in order to further the assimilation process. In 1875, Pratt pulled seventy-two American Indian prisoners from the Red River War to form the first Indian boarding school in Florida.⁶ The prisoners were adult males, and the level of accomplishment differed with each student; depending on how much of their American Indian identity they shed replacing it with an Anglo-Euro influenced identity. The students were taught English, European culture, vocational skills, and required to dress in European clothing.⁷ Another important part of this education system was the shedding of the Native American religions to be replaced by conversion to Christianity.⁸ The students, who embraced the change from American Indian to Anglican, were an important step toward confirming the vision of American Indian assimilation through education.

Pratt convinced two schools in Virginia to accept the twenty-two students who voluntarily continued their education

⁵ David Wallace Adams, “From Bullets to Boarding Schools: The Educational Assault on American Indians”, In *“They Made Us Many Promises”: The American Indian Experience 1524 to the Present*, edited by Philip Weeks, 155-174 (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2002): 155.

⁶ Weeks, 178-179. Lorene Sisquoc, curator of Sherman Museum, interview with the author, November 16, 2009, Riverside, California.

⁷ Letter from C.H. Yates, *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Year 1887*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 13. Clarke Historical Library, *Richard Pratt and Indian Boarding Schools*, <http://clarke.cmich.edu/indian/treatyeduction.htm> (Accessed January 2010).

⁸ Clarke Historical Library. “Federal Education Policy & Off-Reservation Schools, 1870-1933. <http://clarke.cmich.edu/indian/treatyeduction.htm> (Accessed January 2010).

when the War Department discontinued the schooling experiment in 1878.⁹ Pratt completed his vision in 1879 with the opening of the first Indian boarding school called the Carlisle Industrial Training School located in Pennsylvania.¹⁰ The student body consisted of Native Americans from multiple tribes, as would be common in most of the off-reservation Indian boarding schools.¹¹

The education provided at Carlisle and subsequent boarding schools differed depending on the child's gender. All of the children received a vocational education with the goal of obtaining a lower income job.¹² In 1887, the Indian Affairs department reported that Carlisle offered, "carpentering, wagon-making, harness-making, tailoring, shoemaking, tinning, painting, printing, baking, and farming" for the males.¹³ The female Indian students, however, learned "sewing, laundry, [and] housework."¹⁴ The Indian Affairs department believed that the solution to the American Indian problem was in the services provided through the Indian boarding schools. "Let this policy [Indian boarding schools' vocational courses] be carried out for ten years, and each Indian will have a well-improved home, and the rising generation will be prepared to earn their living."¹⁵

Following strict military schedules and emphasizing the importance of work were critical to the boarding schools success of turning the Native American children from their heritage to the "white way."¹⁶ Students were not allowed to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cultural Systems Research, Inc, *Cultural Resources Surveying: Ethnographic Resources Candidate Site Selection Phase*, California Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Project (California: 1987), 59.

¹³ *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the Year 1887* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 257.

¹⁴ Ibid., 257.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶ W.A. Jones, letter to Agents and Bonded Superintendents, April 12, 1892. The military precision would be drilled into the children through the use of such things as marching drills and whistle or bell signals.

speak their native language once their English was sufficient.¹⁷ Many students lost the ability to speak in their native language or were unable to communicate effectively with their relatives and other tribal members due to the students' vocabulary deficiency. This served to distance the children from their culture and traditions and further undermined the authority figures at home and also reinforced the American Indian belief that the boarding schools were aimed at destroying their families and by extension their tribes.

The first Indian boarding school opened in Southern California was the Indian Industrial Training School (often referred to as the Perris School) in Perris, California. The school opened in 1897 and remained open until 1904.¹⁸ The Senate passed an amendment on May 31, 1900 to "...increase appropriation for removal of school from Perris to Riverside, Cal."¹⁹ According to Lorene Sisquoc, curator of the Sherman Museum in Riverside, California; the Perris School was closed in 1904 due to problems with the school's water source. The Sherman school opened in 1901 and is still in operation today as an Indian boarding school. Most Indian boarding schools were closed or completely changed to promote Native culture (as well as teaching the education curriculum required by the state government) by the end of the twentieth century.²⁰

First Letter

The two letters to be analyzed are from the archives of the Sherman Museum located in Riverside, California. Each letter

¹⁷ Cultural Systems, 59. *Annual Report of 1887*, 260. In the *Annual Report of 1887*, Pratt writes about Native languages. He no longer sees a use for them since the Native children at the boarding schools will be taught to be fluent in the English language.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹ Microfilm from the *Congressional Record*, reel 71, vol. 33-34. Index, Cong 56, Sess. 1-2, 1899-1901.

²⁰ Patricia Dixon and Clifford E. Trafzer, "The Place of American Indian Boarding Schools in Contemporary Society," in *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 238-241.

Indian Boarding Schools

is from the bound volume of carbon-copies from the school's Superintendent's office. The letters also share a connection to the Perris student Romundo Balcktooth, an Agua Caliente native. The first letter reproduced below was written by Superintendent Harwood Hall to Dr. L. A. Wright, United States Indian Agent at San Jacinto, California.²¹ Hall was writing to notify Wright of the death of Agua Caliente native, Romundo Balcktooth's death on November 1, 1901 at the age of fourteen.

Indian School, Perris, Cal.
Nov. 2, 1901

Dr. L. A. Wright:
U. S. Indian Agent:
San Jacinto, California

Dear Sir:-

I have to report that Romundo Balcktooth, aged 14, a Mission Indian boy from the Agua Caliente (Warners Ranch) Reservation, was found dead in his bed yesterday morning. The physician who was called in pronounced the cause of death heart failure.

The body was immediately sent to Agua Caliente by train and stage and arrived there this morning.

Very respectfully,
Superintendent.²²

The above is an internal letter for the Indian Affairs agency. Considering that the Superintendent, Harwood Hall,

²¹ Miscellaneous 9/11/1901 to 7/28/1902, 80. Carbon copy of a letter in bound volume of carbon copies.

²² Ibid.

started the letter out with the statement, “I have to report...”²³ indicated there was a policy regarding the deaths of students and who within the agency was to be informed. The letter also informs the reader that the death of a fourteen year old was attended to by a physician to determine the cause of death. Lastly, the letter reveals the practice of releasing some of the bodies to the families. Many more questions arise, despite some answers provided by the letter.

One question regarding the letter could be: Why would a fourteen year old die of heart failure? Some scholars have done extensive research into the physical care and treatment of enrolled children at the boarding schools and the lack thereof. One could reasonably see the possibilities for the heart failure to be attributed to malnutrition, physical abuse, disease, birth defeat, and so on.²⁴ Several other questions of concern are: Why were some students’ bodies shipped home while other were not? Was it an attempt to conceal the cause of death? Who was the presiding physician and what were their medical qualifications? Additional research into these questions would be necessary.

Second Letter

The second letter presented below was also written by Superintendent Hall for Mrs. J. H. Babbitt in Warenrs, California on November 6, 1901.²⁵ The letter conveys Mrs. Babbitt’s desire to have Mariano, a student of the Perris School, sent home. Hall denies the request with the explanation of following orders from “the Office.”²⁶

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, “Introduction: Origin and Development of the American Indian Boarding School System,” in *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 20-21.

²⁵ Miscellaneous 9/11/1901 to 7/28/1902, 95. The letter has Warenrs, California. It is possible it was shorthand for Warner Springs, California.

²⁶ Ibid.

Indian School, Perris, Cal.
November 6, 1901.

Mrs. J. H. Babbitt:
Teacher Indian School;
Warens, California.

Dear Mrs. Babbitt:

Your letter in regard to Mariano's coming home at hand. The truth of the matter is that under ordinary circumstances I would immediately send Mariano home provided he could pay his own way, but there is a continual line of requests coming in daily from the various reservations desiring children home for different causes; and I have received strict instructions not to send children home. In fact, the Office tells me I have no authority to permit pupils to visit during the school year, and that I am only to pay transportation expenses when the time for which pupil enter-ed [sic], which cannot be less than two years and preferably when the course of the school study has expired, which means not less than [sic] five years.

I know the pupils have gotten in bad habits and I do not feel justified in sending Mariano home. I think you will appreciate the situation. We all feel sorry for Romundo's people and the shock was severely felt here. Mariano feels very badly over it, but it is one of those occurrences which accidentally happen.

Very sincerely
Superintendent²⁷

²⁷ Ibid.

The second letter raises questions that are both related and unrelated to the first letter. According to the letter, Mariano's parents did not have the authority to have Mariano sent home. Instead, the decision was made by the Indian Affairs office. Superintendent Hall enforced hegemonic control over that of the parents, in relation to the students. That brings up the question of whether Hall personally believed in his hegemony or was just enforcing the policies required of him by the home office. Why was the "home office" requiring a strict no-release policy for the students if in the past it had been lenient?²⁸ Was the change in policy, regarding students' visits home, established prior to the death of Romundo? Why does the Superintendent feel the students are exhibiting "bad habits"?²⁹ What are the "bad habits" and where were the students learning the "bad habits"?³⁰ How were Mariano and Romundo connected or were they even connected, since their families are situated in separate reservations? Considering the dates of each letter (only four days apart), the question of how reliable and quick communication between different Native peoples in different locations functioned during the early twentieth century is raised. Additionally, how would uncensored information pass between the students at the boarding schools and their families considering the schools censorship policies? Finally, what was the connection between Mariano and the death of Romundo, if any? Did Mariano witness something? Was the death of Romundo an accident? Many of the questions will never be answered unless further information can be found through more research.

Further Research

Both letters are found at the Sherman Indian Museum in Riverside, California. There are also records from the Indian Affairs department (also known as the Bureau of Indian Affairs) located at the National Archives at Riverside facility in Perris,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

California and facilities in Washington D.C. and Maryland. Researchers can also find books on the topic of Indian boarding schools at most bookstores. The topics covered include, but are not limited to: personal accounts of students, resistance amongst the student body, boarding schools' policies, and the treatment and care provided to the boarding school students. Individual case studies are one topic of interest that may be pursued. Also, one could look into the outing system of the Indian boarding schools within the United States and those in Canada.

Conclusion

The examination of documents like those presented in this paper is essential in gaining a fuller understanding of American Indian history. More often than not history is presented in a one-sided format representing the “winning sides” version of things. For too long, the history of the Indian boarding schools was taught as being humane and the way the “savage Indian” was civilized. This excluded the side of the boarding schools that destroyed some families and caused the astrocization of some of the American Indian children. In order to understand the development of the present-day Native American tribes and their sovereignty relationship to the United States' federal government; people need to research and analysis a comprehensive history through the use of surviving documents and oral histories from those involved in Indian boarding schools.

Suggested Readings for Further Research

Lomawaima, K. Tsianina. *They Called It Prairie Light*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

Perris and Sherman Indian Boarding School Documents.
Sherman Indian Museum. Riverside, California.

Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75;
National Archives And Records Administration at
Riverside (Pacific Region) Perris, California.

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